Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*
Christopher S. Lutz
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1. Christopher S. Lutz takes up the hard challenge of proving *After Virtue*'s relevance to philosophers and scholars of any school. Three elements of his rich reading guide are worth stressing: the relevance of the philosophy of science in relation to MacIntyre's study in moral theory; the enquiry into MacIntyre's Marxist background; the usage of other works to clarify *After Virtue*'s claims, especially short essays and scarcely known early books. In addition to these and parallel to the unfolding of the main argument, the reader contains a retrieval of major critiques that takes into account the most controversial points of *After Virtue*.

2. The philosophy of science plays a fundamental role not only in *After Virtue,* but also in the preparatory works that precede MacIntyre's best-known book. "Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science" (MacIntyre 1977, first published in *The Monist,* vol. 60 n. 4, pp. 453-72) is an article in which the scientific method, the enquiring subject's existential certainties and moral philosophy come to interact. Lutz expounds the content of this essay and recalls the importance MacIntyre himself attached to it:

> [It] marks a major turning point in my thinking... It is elicited by my reading of and encounters with Imre Lakatos and Thomas Kuhn and what was transformed was my conception of what it was to make progress in philosophy (5).

To explain this claim, Lutz pays much attention to the theories of Lakatos, Kuhn, and Popper: an understandable move, considered that the aim of his book is that of helping people at their first encounter with *After Virtue.* There is another reason showing Lutz's choice not to be arbitrary: the very first chapter of *After Virtue,* the "disquieting suggestion" which puzzled many readers, tells of a "know-nothing political party" destroying all the institutional forms of scientific research: laboratories, university departments, and so on. After this disaster, MacIntyre imagines, scattered pieces of scientific knowledge

are collected, and people try to make sense of them. They aim at restoring a coherent whole, but their understanding of what it is to make experimental science is inevitably and severely hampered and, to some extent, completely obstructed. In the preface to the Third Edition MacIntyre bitterly reveals that this chapter is a reference to a science fiction masterpiece which unfortunately went unnoticed (MacIntyre 2007, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Third Edition, University of Notre Dame Press: xvi).

Why is it so important to recognize MacIntyre's debt to philosophy of science? Because one of the fundamental claims of *After Virtue,* retained in subsequent books, is that moral philosophy, or even individual moral reasoning, works through explanatory paradigms. The individual begins his or her life by learning these paradigms from parents and the broader community and then goes on to expand or change them after the discovery of different and rival ones. The result of these encounters may be conversions, modernizations, or even the merging of different paradigms into one another. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (MacIntyre 1988, University of Notre Dame Press) is a much more complete reworking of this basic intuition. The book explores the way in which, for instance, Aristotelian and Augustinian paradigms come to merge into Thomism, while some elements of Platonism and pre-Socratic researches were integrated into Aristotelian philosophy. In *After Virtue* the paradigms compared are, roughly speaking, Aristotelianism and anti-Aristotelianism. The refined versions of the latter are Enlightenment philosophies that reject teleology as the possibility of an objective knowledge of human nature, the human good and, consequently, the means to attain it. According to MacIntyre, Enlightenment philosophy is exhausted and falls prey to Nietzsche's unmerciful accusations of being a mere disguise for arbitrary "will to power". Of course, a paradigm can be rejected while some of its crucial acquisitions are maintained: Galileo himself, for instance, continued to rely on the Greek-Arab mathematics his masters had employed in rejecting the Ptolemaic paradigm. Nonetheless, changing the structure of one's moral reasoning, say, from Aristotelianism to Nietzschean genealogical nihilism or to Enlightenment philosophies like Utilitarianism or Kantianism, implies a "paradigm shift". This experience looks close to a conversion whose extent is exemplified by MacIntyre's own turn from Analytical Marxism to Thomism: unsurprisingly, Marxism and elements of analytical philosophy continue to play a central role in MacIntyre's thought, his latter works like *Dependent Rational Animals* (MacIntyre 2001, *Dependent Rational Animals. Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Open Court) included.

Moral narratives, according to MacIntyre, can incur a stalemate not dissimilar from what happened to the Ptolemaic system when it became unable to ex-

plain empirical observations economically and coherently. A person educated, say, in a strictly Aristotelian morality would feel compelled to change his or her beliefs after ascertaining the inadequacy of Aristotle's biology. MacIntyre's thesis is that contemporary moral disagreements are the touchstone of the Enlightenment's failure to give a convincing objective foundation to morality: anything and its contrary can be claimed and contested, within and without individual traditions of enquiry like the Kantian, the Utilitarian, the Postmodernist and so on. What distinguishes a successful research paradigm from its defeated rivals is that the former must not only be able to overcome the deadlocks of the latter but also to explain these very deadlocks. This is exactly what *After Virtue* tries to do, especially in the chapter tellingly entitled "Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail" (MacIntyre 2007: 51).

3. If MacIntyre's relationship with philosophy of science is relatively easy to explore, perhaps the same cannot be said with reference to MacIntyre's Marxist background. The issue becomes even more complicated when one considers that MacIntyre, being active in a period when Marxism was both an extremely lively scholarship in philosophy and a strong cultural-political standpoint, was a Marxist of a peculiar sort. The question at the root of *After Virtue* is indeed, and rather surprisingly, "how to delegitimize Stalinism *morally*?", a question no responsible Marxist scholar could avoid posing after the Hungarian uprising of 1956. Lutz makes use of secondary sources like *Alasdair MacIntyre Engagement with Marxism* (Blackledge - Davidson, eds., 2009, *Alasdair MacIntyre Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings 1953-1974,* Haymarket Books, pp. 123-34) and of seldom-cited early books like *Marxism and Christianity* (MacIntyre 1968, Shocken Books) to discharge this particularly difficult task. The main points he thus illuminates are MacIntyre's account of "human action", in opposition to "human behavior" as understood by behaviorists; the critique of ideology and of the modern individualist use of rights, which echoes Marx's *On the Jewish Question*; the disproval of the implicit and explicit claim of managerial omnipotence by bureaucratic institutions (this latter, a blatant anti-Stalinist claim). All of these complex and recurring elements of MacIntyre's thought are hardly understandable without an account of his Marxist sources like the one shortly offered by Lutz. The result is that the deconstruction of frequently abused contrasts between individuals and collective bodies, individual and collective rights, anticipate to some extent more recent critiques voiced by Republican writers:

Because the individual exists in his own social relations ad because the collective is a society of individuals, the problem of freedom is not the problem of

the individual against society but the problem of what sort of society we want and what sort of individuals we want to be. The unfreedom consists in everything which stands against this. (129)

4. Lutz is clearly sympathetic to the main thesis advanced by MacIntyre, to the point that it is not always possible to distinguish their views: although, he openly addresses some of the (many) critiques MacIntyre has received. In several cases, Lutz accurately reminds the reader of MacIntyre's own replies and concessions contained in the Second and Third editions of *After Virtue,* or given on other occasions. Lutz distinguishes his stance from MacIntyre, at least the MacIntyre of *After Virtue,* over a particularly relevant issue: the existence of "evil practices" (Lutz 2004, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre: Relativism, Thomism, and Philosophy,* Lexington Books). For, if a practice enables the developing of a corresponding virtue, a claim MacIntyre seems to be committed to, one can imagine practices like torture and, correspondingly, paradoxical "evil virtues" such as "courage and skillfulness in torturing". However, this difficulty should be solved thanks to the second- and third-level definitions of virtue, which Lutz again extracts from *After Virtue.* If virtue is not only an "acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tend to achieve those goods which are internal to practices" (p. 120), but needs also referring to the seeking for and better understanding of human good (second-level definition, p. 125) and to the protection and expansion of those traditions which are necessary to the task (third level definition, p. 128), it derives that an "evil practice" could be conceivable of only according to the first-level definition, but it should be incompatible with the other two. Lutz also spends time in illustrating the second problem for the central thesis of *After Virtue* and for MacIntyre's alleged Aristotelian-Thomism, that is, the unity of the virtues. MacIntyre himself, in writing the introduction to the Third Edition*,* would have characterized his stance on the "tragic" and dilemmatic choice between competing virtues as a symptom of his not yet being a Thomist (MacIntyre 2007, p. X). Perhaps, it would have been worthy to discuss here the relationship between MacIntyre and "Analytical Thomism", but it was hardly possible to do everything at the same time*.* However, other issues of a certain complexity and gravity, like accusations of relativism, nostalgia, or pessimism, are posed and briefly answered by Lutz in order to give an idea of the debate provoked by *After Virtue.*

5. Lutz closes his book by emphatically saying that *After Virtue* "is not a single work; it has become the foundation for a tradition" (192). Be that literally true or not – many would argue that *After Virtue* and MacIntyre's recent works

are better understood as a version of neo-Thomism - Lutz shows how the central argument of the book is intertwined with philosophy of science, Marxist philosophy, history of philosophy, history itself, literature (there is no space here to explore the recurrences of Jane Austin's works in MacIntyre's books, but they play quite a role), critique of social sciences and many other fields of knowledge which MacIntyre draws on in order to better the "grave disorder" of our "moral language" (MacIntyre 2007, p. 256). Furthermore, Lutz frequently reminds the reader that *After Virtue* remains "a work still in progress" in his author's own words. This openness is another inheritance of philosophy of science and of tradition-constituted, collective modes of philosophical enquiry. Lutz's book, coupled with *After Virtue*, can therefore function as an effective and stimulating provocation into the studying of philosophy, or as a beneficial challenge to one's philosophical assumptions.